

**Mono Lake Shoulder Widening 09-26990_
Project Development Team Meeting
October 18, 2001**

Self-introductions took place and the following people were in attendance: Tim Shultz, Project Manager; Julie Dogris, Right of Way; Bryan Winzenread and Bart Godett, Design; Mike Donahue and Juan C. Torres, Environmental; Paul Gennaro, Project Management; R. Steve Miller, Landscape Architecture; Ken Anderson and Janet Carle, California State Parks; John Cecil, Mono County Board of Supervisors 4th District; John Borton and Roger Porter, Forest Service; Lisa Cutting, Mono Lake Committee, Larry Johnston, Mono County Local Transportation Commission; Andrea Loven, Program/Project Management (scribe).

Scope, Cost and Schedule:

Tim Shultz stated that the cost of the project now stands at \$13,991,000 including the updated escalation costs. The dates may change at this meeting. The scope is still unchanged, and we are still looking at the same limits. The project has been conceptually approved to include the vista site on the northeast corner of the intersection of Highway 395 and Cemetery Road. Mike Donahue reported that we are currently in the environmental phase. The Draft Environmental Document was supposed to be out this fall, but the technical documents will not be complete until 12/01. The cultural documents are in process. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) cannot keep up with the number of Caltrans highway projects. We are now looking at the following dates:

6/02 Draft Environmental Document to FHWA
1/03 FHWA approval of Draft Environmental Document
10/03 Approval of Final Environmental Document

Mike stated that the Final Environmental Document is a blended document – an EIR for CEQA and a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for NEPA. All Phase I surveys are basically done. We are currently looking at ½ acre of impacts to wetlands in the worst-case scenario. Caltrans surveyed the entire core and the Army Corp of Engineers validated our delineation. There are no shoreline wetlands impacts and no wetlands will be impacted by the project at the Cunningham property. The wetlands are north of Tioga Lodge. The project would construct minimal two to six feet high walls in the wetlands area that really wouldn't be seen, as they will be hidden by vegetation. If the walls are constructed 20-30 feet away from the traveled way, no guardrail will be needed. If not, guardrail will have to be installed.

Since we have established new dates for the Environmental Document, staff will have to go back to the Mono County Local Transportation Commission (LTC) with the new dates and the reality that the project will increase 3.5% in costs per year over the general project.

Right of Way lead-time is approximately 24 months due to private property owners and utility relocations. Right of Way could possibly start right of way acquisitions prior to the Final Environmental Document if no controversy exists in the Draft Environmental Document, which in this project will not be the case. If FHWA approves the Draft Environmental Document in 1/03, then we could be looking at a Public Hearing in 3/03. Tim stated that he would go back to the LTC with the schedule and cost change escalation of approximately \$500,000.

Discussion ensued in regards to the project having any 4F issues. Mike stated that he has contacted experts and they don't feel there are any 4F issues on this project. Normally the types of resources that we are dealing with are not 4F areas under the law. Dispersed recreation areas aren't generally 4F areas.

FHWA makes the call on 4F issues and dictates the types of evaluations that need to be completed if they feel a 4F issue is involved. Normally a 4F evaluation is done with the Draft Environmental Document. Caltrans will meet with the FHWA informally in the near future and FHWA will inform Caltrans if they want a 4F draft evaluation done as part of the Draft Environmental Document. Agencies would not be aware of a 4F evaluation until the Draft Environmental Report comes out. Caltrans will move forward with a 4F evaluation as part of the Draft Environment Report if required by FHWA.

FHWA takes approximately two to four months to review the Draft Environmental Document. Lawyers from FHWA also review the document and are very conservative on 4F issues. On an overall prospective, most of the impacts can be largely mitigated. Eight-foot shoulder widths are still the primary focus on the project.

Designer's Guess:

Bart Godett reviewed his plans with his best guess of combining walls and slopes. The project begins at the marina access road, which will be closed off. Mono County is fine with that and feels it would be a good opportunity for a scenic overview. Bart stated that there would be a small amount of fill at the north end.

A wall is being proposed from just south to just north of Picnic Grounds Road (Marina access). The high existing vegetation in this area should hide the wall. The wall would be approximately 22 feet high, but could be stepped in elevation with the stepped sections planted with vegetation. A slope could be used in the scarred area as we work along the lake. At the narrow area, about halfway between the Marina and Tioga Lodge, a wall would be used again to avoid getting too close to the lake's high water mark. Pullout locations are still up for discussion, and may require a wall depending on how big and their location. A slope is most likely from the wall at the narrow section to a point south of Tioga Lodge where we already have the required highway cross section. There is a huge hole north of Tioga Lodge on the east side. If a wall is placed in this location, we are looking at a wall approximately 16 feet tall. There is some vegetation in that area as well as a fiber optic cable. If fill is used, there won't be a problem, so a slope is being suggested in this area. Guardrail is in that area now and if the catch point is moved nine feet out, guardrail won't have to be used in the area, which would be nice. The target lake level elevation is 1952 meters. The park service stated that 6,392 feet is the mid-point of the 26-foot management range.

Design is recommending flatter slopes on both sides at the Cunningham property. Some cut and some fill could be utilized. Caltrans wants to minimize the impacts to the Cunningham property, and hopefully Caltrans won't have to buy him out. The slope will have to be laid back some because of site distance issues. There is also a site distance issue at Penne's property. The trees in the proposed fill areas on the east side, north of the pullout and Tioga Lodge, are probably going to have to be removed.

Approaching the shrimp plant, there is a half moon drive that cuts in, which the McPherson's want to develop for a proposed development. Design is proposing slopes in this area and when you get up to the wetlands, a wall. There are no major migrations of deer in this area. Walls tend to direct deer, but eight-foot shoulders would help with site distance to avoid hitting deer. Caltrans doesn't want to do anything to increase the deer mortality. A deer crossing is not being considered because it is not a concentrated deer migration area. Some of those present were concerned that if a wall were constructed in this area that the deer may walk a certain path, which could increase deer mortality. The topography at the base of the Lee Vining grade is not very good, but bad topography is not necessarily an issue for deer. Lisa Cutting asked Caltrans to consider all factors in this issue to come up with the best response.

A wall 40 meters long by 1.6 meters (5-6 ft) high is being proposed on the west side just north of the wetlands. There is a potential pullout on the east side just south of the Mono Inn. Fill slope can be used on both sides of the road south of Mono Inn, as well as gentle topography in this area. We want to lay back some of the slopes in this area to increase the potential for revegetation. Perhaps a small wall in this area would be better than cutting back the slopes, but some of the slope will have to be cut out of these areas.

Landscape Architecture will come up with three or four methods to handle the scarred areas and let Design know what can work. Although visual appearance is important, site distance safety issues have to be seriously addressed. Fills, rather than walls or slopes, are easier to fit back in to the environment. The Resident Engineer will be given very specific criteria on slopes, fills, and cuts so that it is done correctly. Although one of the proposed alternatives still has park property in it, there are no proposed walls or fills on state park property in the preliminary design.

R. Steve Miller showed mock up drawings of what the area would look like after revegetation. The cuts could be tinted to blend in with the vegetation. Natural plantings done with “dry water” will encourage revegetation. Cable netting with squares large enough to accommodate plantings can be laid down to protect the slope. The willow vegetation will hide the walls within a relatively short amount of time, and looking from the visitor’s center downward, it will actually be very hard to discern any walls. Steve stated that the walls in the mock up design hadn’t been colored yet. Steve reminded those present that any larger walls would be stair-stepped with tiers planted. Vegetation will have to be removed approximately 15 feet from the proposed wall areas for construction of the walls and then vegetation in the area can regrow. Pinion Pines will be planted in the area. If any of the soils in the area require amendments to assist in successful revegetation, this will be done. Landscape Architecture looks at this project as a way of improving some of the scarred areas from when the road was originally built. Guardrail color options were brought up and staff relayed that there are options such as wood faced metal railing and a specific rock wall type, but all have higher costs and maintenance associated with them.

Transportation/Traffic studies don’t show that turn pockets are necessary at commercial properties. If Tioga Lodge wants a left turn lane, then they will have to go through the permit process and it would have to be warranted to install – even if Tioga Lodge requests it. Larry Johnston reported that the guardrail glare in Lee Vining is very noticeable and staffed relayed that there are ways to speed up the weatherization process so that guardrail glare can be diminished. Guardrail is only used where we can’t get a thirty-foot clear recovery area.

Drainage structures have to be installed to accommodate the run-off. We cannot put holes in the walls (if rock walls are used) for drainage as ice dams are created when snow melts and the runoff travels through the holes. Caltrans will seriously examine the following:

- Recommendations of 55 and 60 mph speed alternatives
- The best design for the project
- Minimizing all impacts
- Design will look at all of the pullout sites and give three or four choices
- Site distances/safety concerns
- Recovery areas
- A 10 or 12 foot offset of the current centerline at one location would be the worst scenario

PDT Member Issues and Round Table Discussion:

Bryan Winzenread: No comments.

Larry Johnston: Asked at what point the project becomes too expensive to construct? Tim Shultz said at no point as long as the purpose and need are still present, and the sponsor is still willing to pay for it. Mr. Johnston stated his concern that every increase has to be paid for in some way from County funds, which then may prevent another project from being constructed. He stated his concern that the Department of Fish and Game has been absent from these meetings. Tim Shultz stated that they have not been invited to the PDT meetings, but our staff has been in contact with them. Tim reminded everyone that Caltrans still has resource requirements from Fish and Game that have to be met on the project, whether they attend the meetings or not. Larry expressed his concern that the fox is guarding the henhouse and suggested an independent visual analysis instead of Caltrans doing it. He brought up the fact that there are lots of shoulders less than eight-feet wide from here to Reno and wanted to know the reasons Caltrans would have decided to use less than eight-feet wide shoulders. Staff stated the following reasons:

- Current Caltrans Standards
- ADT (traffic volumes)
- Shoulders adequate for rehab construction - not new construction
- Coleville is not new construction – it was a rehab
- Environmental impacts

At an RPAC meeting held in June 2001, the RPAC originally suggested four-foot variable shoulders and Caltrans is still pursuing the eight-foot shoulders Tim stated that was the direction given to Caltrans by the project sponsor, the Mono County Local Transportation Commission. Larry stated that Landscape Architecture has a tough job in convincing the group that the finished design will improve the scars and the west area of Highway 395. He likes the thinking present at today's meeting in trying to meet the group's needs.

Mike Donahue: Stated that the mitigation costs on this project are very extensive and will cost approximately \$3,000,000. He stated that Caltrans is whittling away at the concerns on the project and continues to look at ways to address the safety concerns as well as minimizing impacts on the west side. Mike said that the primary focus of this project is the safety of the traveling public while taking into consideration the public's and resource agency's comments. He said that Caltrans would never support degradation to its standards.

Ken Anderson: Asked Caltrans to evaluate all aspects of the project including scenery, ancillary impacts, and whether or not park property is getting buried. He also suggested that Design give us photos of revegetation at 5, 10, and 15 years so it can be more realistic to individuals looking at a mock up design.

John Cecil: Stated that he was in support of any safety issues in the area and that he would see Tim at the next LTC meeting.

Bart Godett: Asked anyone if they had any concerns to please call him. Bart has met with all property owners on the project and stated that each owner has their own concerns and ideas.

R. Steve Miller: Stated that Landscape Architecture is anxious to get to the design of this project, encouraged everyone to move forward, and stated that if anyone has any concerns to please call him. Steve said that the type of wall won't be decided until the design phase of the project and that walls and fills are dictated by how much land we have and any realignment. Caltrans will show one or two treatments in each direction of what the walls could look like in the Environmental Document. We don't want to limit ourselves in the Environmental Document in case something better comes up before actual construction.

Janet Carle: Expressed her concern with the mock up not showing close up details. She would like Caltrans to make the design details more visible so that the public at large can see what is being proposed and what the walls, fills and slopes will look like. Design stated that it is difficult to insert a step wall until they know how tall the wall is in the area and whether or not a step wall will be needed. Janet said that actual photographs offer an easier mental picture of the final project vs. engineering drawings. She asked if the Lahonton Regional Water Quality Board had any comments and Tim stated that they have concerns on fills on the lakeside and are concerned with the water quality.

Roger Porter: Stated that he thinks he has a mental image of what this will look like vs. the reality of what it really looks like.

Lisa Cutting: Asked Caltrans to use a combination of photographs to show the close-up vs. distant views, and also asked Caltrans to keep in mind the following things:

- Visual Impacts
- Environmental Impacts
- Taking a modified approach to the project
- Minimizing the manipulation of landscaping

Caltrans should be concerned with safety issues, but she stated that the Mono Lake Committee would like to see Caltrans use discretion and not make standard eight-foot wide shoulders throughout the project. The group would like Caltrans to use special techniques and design exceptions on this job. Lisa stated that the 8-10 pages of flip charts from the RPAC were the only items that were agreed upon.

John Borton: Asked for clarification on how many alternatives there are on the project. Tim Shultz stated that there are five: A design speed of 55 mph with walls; 55 mph without walls; 60 mph with walls; 60 mph without walls; and a no build alternative. Caltrans staff stated that going into the lake is unacceptable. John asked if the types of retaining walls are shown in the Environmental Document. Design stated that once they know what the walls will look like then we can discuss the wall's facings such as mosaic, etc., based on the height and tiers of the walls. A question was asked about the length of time for plant establishment and R. Steve Miller relayed that the landscape contractor will have a three-year time period for establishment of plants. John asked if the 4F call is actually made by FHWA and asked who our local contact was. Brian Zewe had been our local contact until he was recently called into military service. Staff relayed that FHWA is glad to talk to resource agencies and if the Forest Service can get through to FHWA it would be very helpful, especially if we need to get started on a 4F study. John asked about the design of the pullouts and whether they would be able to accommodate a 180-degree turn. Caltrans is not considering this and stated that the pullouts would be less than 60 meters and were designed to provide an extra wide shoulder for pullouts. Caltrans has certain criteria differentiation turnouts from pullouts. The vista point (enter off of Cemetery Road) is the only pullout designed for a stay over 20 minutes, which will provide a nice turnaround in a larger area. John requested a PDT member list with the minutes from today's meeting. He

also asked if Caltrans knew what the accident rates are in Walker Canyon and Bryan Winzenread stated that he knows Caltrans has statistics on accident rates in Walker Canyon, but he doesn't know how many off hand.

Julie Dogris: Stated that she needs a new data sheet with the correct Right of Way dates for Nancy Escallier.

Tim Shultz: Asked if Caltrans could do anything to help the groups understand their proposals? Lisa stated that we can address the safety issues, but in other areas where safety isn't an issue, Caltrans should use less than eight-foot shoulders. Mike Donahue stated that the Environmental Document would show the improvement to the area. Lisa asked Bart Godett what percentage of the 2.9 miles of the project would be affected on the east side by fills/slopes or walls? Mike Donahue thinks it might be a small percentage – perhaps 20%. After preliminary calculations, Bart Godett stated that approximately 50% of the 2.9 miles of the project will be affected on both the east and west sides with fills/slopes or walls.

Juan Torres: Stated that Design is trying to minimize construction impacts and trying to find a less intrusive way to construct retaining walls. Tim stated that there would be no impact south of Tioga Lodge on the west side.

Action Items:

1. Staff will meet with the Mono County Local Transportation Commission (LTC) with the new dates and the reality that the project will increase 3.5% in costs per year over the general project.
2. Right of Way requested a new data sheet with the correct Right of Way dates.
3. Bart Godett (Design) will continue to refine the locations for walls, fills, and slopes and will notify every one of the impacted areas.
4. Provide a PDT member list to John Borton of the Forest Service with the minutes from today's meeting.

The team felt that it was not necessary to have another meeting prior to the holidays, and that perhaps a meeting may need to be held in January or February of 2002. Tim asked if anyone had any concerns to please contact him.